Were the ten virgins historically more likely brides or bridesmaids?

From the standpoint of first-century Roman and Judean **law and social custom**, it is **highly implausible** that the ten virgins in Matthew 25 would be understood as ten *brides* of a single bridegroom. The picture coheres closely with the well-attested role of **unmarried female attendants (bridesmaids/companions)** in Jewish and wider Greco-Roman wedding practice, and there is no evidence for a normal scenario in which one groom is ceremonially married at once to ten virgins in a single wedding procession.

In other words: **the historically natural reading, apart from theology, is "attendants," not "brides."** A "ten-bride" scenario is not impossible in the abstract (given Jewish polygyny), but it would be **exceptional and culturally odd** rather than a familiar wedding scene.

1. Legal backdrop: monogamy, polygyny, and practical limits

Roman law and custom

In the Roman world, especially for Roman citizens, **marriage was understood as monogamous**. Classical and late-antique sources treat **polygamy as contrary to Roman custom and law**, and Christian writers like Augustine can refer matter-of-factly to "the usage of Rome" that does not allow a man to have more than one wife living. Modern summaries of Roman law and social practice consistently note that **simultaneous multiple legal wives were not recognized**; bigamy/polygamy is treated as anomalous or illegal, not a normal option.[1] [2]

This matters because Matthew's audience lives under Roman rule; even where local ethnic law differs, **the broader imperial norm is one man–one wife** in public, legally recognized marriage.

Jewish law and practice

By contrast, **Jewish halakha allowed polygyny** in principle. Later rabbinic sources (Talmud and post-Talmudic halakha) assume that a man may have more than one wife, at least in theory. However:[3]

- Even in rabbinic discussions, **having many wives is treated as unusual and problematic**, especially because the husband is halakhically obligated to provide support and conjugal rights to each wife.[3]
- The Talmud (Yevamot) suggests that up to **four wives** might be tolerated as an upper limit for a man who can genuinely support and satisfy them; more is treated as inadvisable.[3]

This material is later than the first century, but it reflects a tradition in which multiple wives are **legally possible but socially limited and not the default**. In Second Temple and early rabbinic Judaism, concrete examples of polygyny are mainly associated with **wealthy or royal figures** (e.g., Herod), not ordinary village weddings.

To posit **ten simultaneous brides for one groom** in a Galilean/Judean peasant context is therefore:

- Legally conceivable under Jewish law,
- But **socially extreme**, economically implausible, and
- Strongly at odds with the surrounding Roman monogamous norm.

Nothing in known Jewish or Roman legal sources suggests a standard wedding pattern featuring **one groom formally marrying ten virgin brides in one joint ceremony**.

2. First-century wedding customs in Judea and the wider Greco-Roman world

Basic structure of the Jewish wedding

First-century Judean weddings typically had two main stages, already familiar from later rabbinic literature:

- **Betrothal (erusin / kiddushin)** – a legally binding act done earlier, often at the bride's home; from then on, she is legally his wife, though they do not yet live together.[4] [5]
- **Wedding / home-taking (nissuin)** – at a later date (often about a year), the groom **comes—often at night—accompanied by friends and music, to the bride's home** and leads her in procession to his (or his father's) house, where a **wedding feast** is held.[5] [6] [7] [8]

Descriptions of first-century or near-contemporary Jewish custom emphasize:

- **Processions at night**.
- **Torches or lamps** as part of the ceremony.
- **Public celebrations involving neighbors and friends** joining the procession.[8] [9] [5]

These features line up very closely with the Matt 25 scene: a bridegroom coming at night, a group waiting with lamps to join the procession, and entry to a wedding feast.

Torches, lamps, and attendants

Ancient evidence across the wider Mediterranean emphatically connects **weddings** with **torch-lit processions** and **female attendants**:

- Craig Keener's survey of Greek and Roman sources notes that **wedding ceremonies normally began at night**, so torches were standard; women torchbearers commonly go out to meet the groom's party and lead the bride to his house, "as in Mt. 25.1–12."[10]
- In Greek and Roman literature:
  - The bridegroom's appearance is associated with bright torches.[10]

    - Roman sources presume **“nuptial torches”** (lampades) as part of the wedding procession.[10]
    - Seneca explicitly assumes that a **bridesmaid (ancilla pronuba)** would carry a torch.[10]
    - Roman descriptions of the wedding procession mention multiple torches carried by attendants alongside the bride.[11] [12]
- Jewish sources focus more on rejoicing than on torches, but:
    - Torchlight processions of **singing girls** are known at the Temple’s Sukkot celebrations.[13]
    - Rabbinic anecdotes in Ketubot describe sages **dancing before the bride** with myrtle branches and even carrying the bride on shoulders, stressing communal rejoicing around a single kallah (bride).[14] [15]

Later Jewish and Christian descriptions of “ancient Jewish weddings” also repeatedly mention **lamp- or torch-bearing maidens** forming part of the bridal party, waiting to accompany either groom or bride in the nighttime procession.[16] [17] [9] [5] [13] [8]

What stands out is that **carrying lamps/torches at a wedding is a standard job for attendants**, not for multiple brides.

3. “Virgins” and companions in biblical and Greco-Roman wedding imagery

Plural “virgins” with a bride: Psalm 45

Psalm 45 is a royal wedding psalm whose imagery was known in Second Temple Judaism. It explicitly distinguishes between **the bride** and **her virgin companions**:

- “In embroidered garments she is led to the king; **her virgin companions follow her**—those brought to be with her.” (Psalm 45:14–15)[18] [19]

Here:

- There is **one bride**, escorted to the king.
- She is accompanied by multiple **virgins**, clearly differentiated from her.
- These virgins function as **attendants** or *bridesmaids*, not as additional brides.

This kind of imagery—that of a **singular bride plus plural virgin companions**—is exactly what one would expect Matthew’s Jewish audience to know from their Scriptures.

Greek term *parthenoi* in wedding settings

The word used in Matthew 25, *parthenoi* (“virgins”), is widely used in Greek for:

- **Unmarried young women** in general,
- Including both:
    - A **bride prior to consummation**, and

- Her **companions / bridesmaids**, especially when plural and associated with processions.

In Greek and Roman wedding descriptions, **groups of parthenoi** typically function as **attendants**, singing or carrying torches in the procession, while the bride herself is singled out as the central figure.[12] [20] [11] [10]

Early Jewish and Christian description of the parable's setting

While later theological interpretations vary, historical-cultural explanations from a wide range of scholars and educators almost uniformly treat the ten virgins as **attendants of the bride** based on known custom:

- An LDS-produced historical article states: "It was a custom among the Jews for the bridegroom to come at night to the bride's house, where **her bridesmaids attended her**. When the bridegroom's approach was announced, these maidens went out with lamps to light his way into the house for the celebration."[21]
- Other cultural notes emphasize that in a typical village setting **ten or so teenage girls—sisters, cousins, and friends of the bride—would be waiting to greet the groom and escort him in**, not as additional brides but as a visible extension of the bride's honor.[22] [23] [17] [16]

Again, these are not theological arguments so much as **reconstructions of wedding practice**: a single bride surrounded by young unmarried female attendants.

4. How plausible is a "ten brides" scenario in this context?

To ask whether the ten virgins could be brides rather than bridesmaids, given first-century custom and law, one must ask:

1. **Is there evidence of one groom marrying multiple virgins at once in a joint ceremony?** There is **no direct evidence**—Jewish, Roman, or Greek—of a standard wedding pattern featuring **one groom and a set of multiple brides all waiting together in one father's house or as one party**. When multiple wives are mentioned in Jewish sources, they are accumulated over time, or at least there is no depiction of a single joint wedding ceremony or procession with many brides side-by-side.[1] [5] [3]
2. **Would ten simultaneous brides be socially and legally normal?**
   - Under Roman norms, **no**: polygamy is contrary to standard marriage law and practice.[2] [1]
   - Under Jewish norms, while polygyny is not forbidden, rabbinic tradition already treats **more than four wives as strongly discouraged** due to conjugal obligations and financial burden. Ten would be an extreme case even for a wealthy man.[3]
3. **Does the imagery of ten *parthenoi* with lamps match known roles for brides or for attendants?**
   - **Attendants**:

        - Groups of virgin girls carrying lamps or torches at weddings are **well-attested** in Greek and Roman sources.[11] [12] [10]
        - Keener specifically notes traditional Middle Eastern weddings where **women torchbearers go out to meet the groom's company and lead the bride to his home**, precisely as in Matthew's picture.[10]
        - Psalm 45 shows plural virgins as *companions* of the bride, not brides.[19] [18]
    - **Brides**:
        - There is no parallel text where **a group of ten virgins together, all called simply "virgins," constitute ten brides to a single bridegroom in one wedding procession**.
4. **How would a first-century Judean audience have "pictured" the scene?**
   The parable relies on a scenario Jesus' hearers would recognize without explanation. A setting in which:
    - A bridegroom comes at night,
    - A group of virgin girls with lamps are waiting to meet him,
    - Some are prepared with extra oil and others are not,

   corresponds directly to **well-known roles of bridal attendants and torchbearers**. Conversely, imagining ten separate brides, all waiting with their own lamps to become the wives of that one man, would be **legally contentious (by Roman standards), socially unusual (even by Jewish standards), and without clear precedent in known descriptions of village weddings**.

Given how parables function, it is far more plausible that the story is built on a **familiar, culturally ordinary wedding motif** rather than a highly unusual multi-bride event.

5. Conclusion

Restricting the question strictly to **first-century Roman and Judean customs and laws**, and setting theology aside:

- **Roman law and custom** were strongly monogamous; polygamy or bigamy was not a recognized norm for citizens.[2] [1]
- **Jewish law permitted polygyny** in principle, but multiple wives were **exceptional** and practically constrained, with later rabbinic advice discouraging more than four wives even in theory.[3]
- Ancient **wedding practice** in Judea and the broader Greco-Roman world prominently featured:
    - **Nighttime processions**,
    - **Torches or lamps**, and
    - **Groups of unmarried female attendants (virgins) accompanying the bride or greeting the groom**.[9] [5] [12] [8] [11] [10]

- Biblical imagery (notably Psalm 45) and Greco-Roman sources both distinguish between **the single bride** and **her entourage of virgin companions**, aligning perfectly with a reading of the ten virgins as **attendants**, not as multiple brides.[18] [19] [10]

Therefore, **on historical and legal grounds alone**, it is:

- **Very plausible** that the ten virgins in Matthew 25 reflect the customary role of **bridesmaids / virgin companions** in a Jewish wedding.
- **Not historically plausible**—except as a highly exceptional, unillustrated case—that they would be understood as **ten brides** of the one bridegroom.

The structure of first-century wedding customs, the legal environment, and the broader symbolism of "virgins" in wedding imagery all weigh strongly against the multi-bride reading and in favor of understanding these virgins as **attending maidens, not brides**.

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How the "Virgin Daughter of Zion" and the Missing Bride Affect the Analysis

The biblical motif of Israel as a "virgin" and the conspicuous absence of a bride in Matthew 25 do introduce important literary and theological dimensions, but they **do not overturn** the historical-cultural conclusion that the ten virgins function as **attendants** rather than multiple brides. Instead, these features illuminate the parable's theological purpose while remaining consistent with first-century wedding customs.

1. The "Virgin Daughter of Zion" Metaphor

The prophetic personification of Israel/Jerusalem as a **"virgin daughter"** (Isaiah 37:22; Jeremiah 14:17; Lamentations 2:13) is a well-attested biblical metaphor where the nation is depicted as a young woman under God's protection, later "married" to Him in covenant faithfulness. This imagery certainly influences New Testament wedding metaphors, where Christ is the bridegroom and the Church is his bride.[1] [2] [3]

However, this **metaphorical usage is distinct from literal marriage customs** in several crucial ways:

- **It operates at a theological/poetic level**, not a legal or social one. The prophets use "virgin" to emphasize purity, vulnerability, and covenant status, not to describe actual wedding participants.[4] [1]
- **It consistently refers to a singular collective entity** (Israel/Jerusalem as one virgin), never to a group of ten individual virgins simultaneously marrying one groom.[3] [5]
- **It doesn't reflect Roman or Jewish marriage law**, which dealt with concrete legal relationships, dowries, ketubah contracts, and inheritance rights—not poetic metaphors.[6] [7] [8]

The presence of this metaphor in Scripture shows that first-century audiences were **capable of understanding "virgin" language symbolically**, but this actually **strengthens** the historical-cultural reading: they would recognize the difference between a theological metaphor (virgin Israel) and a realistic wedding scene (virgins as attendants). The parable's power depends on its **grounding in recognizable customs**—ten bridesmaids waiting with lamps was a normal sight; ten brides simultaneously marrying one groom was not.

2. The Missing Bride: Impact on the Analysis

The **absence of any bride** in Matthew 25 is striking and demands explanation. This omission does not, however, make the "ten brides" interpretation more plausible. Instead, it reveals the parable's **literary and theological design**:[9] [10] [11]

The omission serves three strategic purposes:

a. Focus on the Bridegroom
By removing the bride, Jesus directs **all attention to himself as the bridegroom** and to the **readiness of his people**. The virgins aren't waiting to see the bride; they're waiting to **join the bridegroom's procession** to the feast. This aligns with the parable's eschatological message: "Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour" (Matt 25:13).[10] [12] [13]

b. The Virgins Represent the Community
In Matthew's theology, the distinction between "bride" and "bridesmaids" may be **intentionally blurred** so that the ten virgins represent **all who are called to the wedding**—the entire community of believers. The bride's absence allows the parable to emphasize that **everyone** must be prepared, not just a select bride figure. This fits Matthew's pattern of using wedding imagery to discuss the **inclusion/exclusion** of people in the kingdom (Matt 22:1-14).[12] [14] [15]

c. Narrative Perspective
The story is told from the **viewpoint of those outside the bride's house**, waiting in the streets with lamps. The bride would be inside her father's home, preparing to be brought out when the groom arrives. The parable's action—waiting, sleeping, trimming lamps, going out to meet the groom—**matches the role of attendants**, not the bride herself. Mentioning the bride would require shifting perspective to inside the house, which would distract from the central action of **waiting and readiness**.[16] [17] [18] [19]

3. Plausible Explanation for the Bride's Omission

The most historically and literarily sound explanation combines **customary practice with rhetorical strategy**:

The bride is implicitly present but narratively unnecessary.

In first-century Jewish weddings, the **bride's role during the waiting period was passive**—she remained in her father's house, veiled and prepared, while others (groom, friends, attendants) managed the public procession. The **active participants** were:[20] [18] [6]

- The **groom** and his friends (who announced his coming)
- The **torch-bearing attendants** (who lit the way)
- The **community** (who joined the celebration)

The bride's presence was **assumed but not described** because she wasn't the focus of the action. Jesus employs a common storytelling technique—**omitting the obvious** to highlight the essential. Just as a modern story might describe "the wedding party waiting for the groom"

without mentioning the bride (since her presence is understood), Matthew's audience would fill in this gap automatically.[21] [11] [22] [23] [16]

This is a form of elliptical storytelling or the "iceberg theory":

The surface narrative (ten virgins, lamps, delayed groom) carries the full weight of meaning; the bride remains below the surface, implied but not stated, because **her explicit mention would dilute the parable's punch**. The omission forces hearers to ask: "Who are these virgins in relation to the wedding?"—and the answer is "the ones who must be ready," which is **exactly the point** about discipleship.[22] [23] [10] [12]

4. Synthesis: How These Elements Complement the Historical Analysis

Rather than contradicting the historical-cultural reading, the "virgin daughter of Zion" motif and the missing bride **reinforce it**:

1. **Theological metaphor vs. social reality**: The prophetic "virgin Israel" metaphor shows that first-century Jews could distinguish between symbolic language and literal customs. They would recognize Matthew 25 as describing **actual wedding roles** (attendants) used to make a theological point, not a literal polygamous scenario.
2. **Omission as emphasis**: The missing bride is a **literary device** that focuses the parable on **readiness for the bridegroom**—the core eschatological message. This doesn't change the fact that the described actions (carrying lamps, joining the procession) fit **bridesmaids**, not brides.
3. **Consistency with law and custom**: A scenario where ten virgins are **attendants** aligns with both Roman monogamous norms and Jewish polygynous (but practically limited) customs. A scenario where they are **ten simultaneous brides** aligns with neither legal system nor attested social practice.[7] [8] [24]

Conclusion: The biblical "virgin" metaphor and the bride's absence are **theological and literary features** that serve the parable's purpose, not evidence for overturning the historical-cultural conclusion. The ten virgins are best understood as **bridesmaids/attendants** whose readiness (or lack thereof) represents the preparedness required of all who await the bridegroom's coming. The missing bride is a **strategic omission** that keeps the focus on Christ and his people's vigilance—precisely what the parable aims to teach.[10] [12] [16]

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